LANGUAGE

2

In this chapter you will learn:

➤ Language is symbolic
➤ Language is governed by phonological, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic rules
➤ The definition of linguistic relativism and linguistic universalism
➤ The characteristics of powerless and powerful speech
➤ How high-context and low-context cultures use language differently

Have you ever met someone who just *always* says the wrong thing? Maybe it's a comment like, "Wow! I never knew you used to be so attractive," or "Congratulations on your graduation! Any job prospects? I'll bet you're sorry you majored in musical theater." You supply the example; I'm sure you know someone like this. It's not out of nastiness—maybe she's really a nice person once you get to know her . . . and don't take anything she says personally. Nor is it out of stupidity—people with advanced degrees have this problem all the time. Ironically, most people who suffer from the "say the wrong thing" syndrome would argue that in fact, it's not their problem with language that's causing so much trouble. Instead, it's the people they talk to who are constantly misinterpreting what they say.

And herein lies the problem.

Language is only as good as the message it conveys to your audience. You've no doubt had the experience of saying something that sounded perfectly intelligent in your head, but the moment it escaped your mouth it made you sound like a moron. You know what you meant. It just didn't come out right!

As we discussed in Chapter 1, thought doesn't always need language . . . or at least it sometimes transcends language.[1] Thought is multidimensional; language is one-dimensional. Stop for a moment and analyze what you're thinking right now. A good chunk of your brain is processing the words you're reading—decoding them, sorting them, making sense of them. But chances are excellent that you're also holding a silent semi-verbal conversation with yourself beneath the surface: "What in the world is this book talking about?" or "My, what a brilliant point this author is making!" You may also be vaguely aware that you're hungry,

and maybe the television is on and you're half listening to the Mythbusters blow something up, and perhaps you're still periodically flashing back to the fight you had with your wife this morning. And this is all happening *simultaneously* inside your skull. Compare this 4D experience with the one-dimensionality of language. On the one hand, you wonder how we can so screw up something so relatively simple. On the other hand, there is absolutely nothing simple about language, and it's even more amazing we humans ever make ourselves understood.

Language Is Ambiguous

Language is so intimately intertwined with our perception of the world, that it is sometimes difficult to remember that in fact *language is symbolic.* Except for onomatopoeia ("boom," "splat," "crash") the words we have for our objects, actions, concepts, and so on, are completely arbitrary. We all know there's nothing innate in a small plastic baby with sleepy-time eyes that makes "doll" the logical representation of that object (or *Koukla* or 多尔 for that matter). Concrete nouns are easy—relatively unambiguous. They're the first things we learn in a foreign language class. No, the problem lies in how language describes the more complex aspects of our experience—time and tense, emotion and values, sensations and abstractions. Because words carry no meaning in and of themselves, we derive their meaning based on our own context—our perceptions, backgrounds, and experiences. Not even considering people who don't share a native language, meaning can still be contested among people living in the same family, let alone the same country.

➤ What's "reasonable" for a pair of shoes? Share your answer with a neighbor and compare your definitions.

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Mom [looking at a credit card bill]: You have got to be kidding me!

Teenager: What?

Mom: How could you spend so much on a pair of shoes??

Teen: You said I could get the shoes as long as the price was "reasonable." They were on sale! Those shoes are usually $500.

Mom: $500 for shoes is not reasonable!

Teen: Exactly! That's why I figured you'd understand that paying $400 was more than reasonable.

Language must be flexible enough to describe the depth and breadth of our vast, varied, and confusing experience. It must try to encompass the inner workings of our logic and imagination. In other words, to work well, language must be slippery—difficult to pin down. Many times when college students are asked to define a concept, the first place they head is the dictionary (or more likely, Google). The problem with finding the "real" definition of a word is that it is incredibly limited. Looking up "javelina" will tell you the word refers to a small desert pig-like animal of the American West that has a strong odor.[2] Easy. What about the word *democracy*? The "real" definition describes a system of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and

➤ You can Google to find the real definition of the word javelina.

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exercised directly by them. But does that specific, accurate definition cover all the meaning that surrounds the word *democracy*? Not even close.

Connotation and Denotation

The reason for this ambiguity is that many words have both denotative meaning and connotative meaning. The denotative meaning is the dictionary definition; connotative meaning includes all the associations and nuances implied by a word. Comedian Kathy Griffin did a routine dissecting the connotations of the words women use to describe other women—Cute: pretty and short; Stunning: pretty and tall; Beautiful: pretty with good hair; Striking: pretty with a big nose; Gorgeous: pretty with blue eyes; Hot: pretty with big boobs. It's funny because it's overly simplistic, yet there is a core of truth. While no dictionary would define the adjective "striking" as "pretty with a big nose," we recognize the aptness of the characterization. If you say you see a man *walking* down the street, there is no overt connotation. Your listener has no way of knowing who the walker is or what you think of him. Yet if you say he *strides* or *ambles* or *struts* down the street, each of these words helps your listener imagine this person more clearly. More importantly, connotative language allows the listener to understand how you as a speaker see him.

By using more specific (and connotative) language, you have communicated more precisely what you mean. Yet as savvy communicators, we don't have to be constantly flipping through a mental thesaurus, finding the biggest, most obscure word we can think of to describe the most mundane object. While it might give you a laugh, it's not necessary to say to a roommate, "Your leftover moo shu pork from a month ago has become deliquescent. Please remove it from the refrigerator." On the other hand, we can challenge ourselves to use the vocabulary we

"If language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant; if what is said is not what is meant, then what must be done remains undone; if this remains undone, morals and art will deteriorate; if justice goes astray, the people will stand about in helpless confusion. Hence there must be no arbitrariness in what is said. This matters above everything."
Confucius lays quite a burden on the human race when he says this. Fall prey to lazy language, and it's the end of civilization as we know it.

Core vocabulary The few hundred words with which we construct over 80 percent of our typical communication interactions.

Fringe (or extended) vocabulary The hundreds of words in our vocabulary that we know but use in 20 percent or less of our typical communication interactions.

have. Although we all know a vast number of words, we actually use only a small percentage of these in everyday communication. With only a few hundred words most of us can construct over 80 percent of our typical communication interactions.[3] This range of words is known as a **core vocabulary**. The remaining words that make up our everyday communications are known as **fringe (or extended) vocabulary**.

Let's return to the idea of thinking like children to relearn our communication habits. Small children are constantly adding to their core vocabularies; they hear words, then try them out, test them, and make them their own. But past a certain age, we stop doing this. Adults may learn new words, but they tend not to use those new words in conversation. While it's never a bad idea to expand our fringe vocabulary, the more important change we can make is to grow our core vocabulary—those few hundred words that we use in our everyday verbal interactions. It's not learning new words; it's learning to use the words we already know.

> ## Jot It Down
>
> All of us have unused words gathering dust on the mental shelves of our vocabulary. Make a list of five useful words you know well but that you have never actually spoken aloud. Perhaps it's a term from your sociology, biology, or macro econ class; maybe it's a word you've read in books but don't feel comfortable using yourself because it "just doesn't sound like you."

➤ The result of a tedious lecture.

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There is a trade-off, however, in making use of connotative language. While connotative words are more vivid and evocative, and by their nature they convey more information than neutral words, connotative language can also be more easily misunderstood if not used carefully.[4] Because connotations are born of associations, people who have widely different experiences may have different associations for the same word. Let's return to the example of our man walking down the street. No one can misunderstand that image. It's too general and bland. However, let's say the man is strutting down the street. One person may conceive an immediate distaste for this hypothetical man, assuming he's an arrogant jerk. But if someone else had a father whose walk was always confidently jaunty, that person might think of a man strutting down the street as self-assured and comfortable in his own skin.

So how are competent communicators supposed to use language to their own best advantage? The best thing to remember is that "dumbing down" language so that it can't possibly be misinterpreted is not a good way to go. Neutral language tends to be one of two things: either imprecise or technical. A child may *cry or lachrymate*, but neither of these words tells us whether the child was pitiful as he *wept* or annoying as he *bawled*. Use neutral and general language, certainly, but be aware of the rhetorical possibilities

of a slightly expanded core vocabulary. You can practice with your (newly developing!) intrapersonal communication. As you go about your daily tasks and self-narrate like a kid, push yourself to think in words you don't typically use in your normal conversation. The Cajun turkey sandwich you're eating is *limp*, *tangy*, and *redolent* of the paper bag you brought it in. Your professor's lecture today was *tedious—droning* even. By simply rehearsing the words in your head, you'll feel more comfortable incorporating them into your conversation with others.

It's worth emphasizing here that the point of expanding your vocabulary is not to appear smarter to others. (Actually, we'll learn later in the chapter about the power of language to fool others into believing you're credible and intelligent, no matter how little you know about a subject.) Instead, an expanded core vocabulary allows you to communicate your ideas more precisely and accurately. And isn't that the whole point of communication to begin with?

Languages Are Constantly Changing

Another reason language is so slippery and tough to pin down is that it is constantly changing over time. As you read before, language must be flexible if it is to accurately and wholly describe the human experience. Without that flexibility, a language dies. You could compare a vital language to a flowing river. There are places in a river's course—confluences or narrow channels—where language changes quickly. These are times and places in history where perhaps a language absorbs many new immigrant speakers and grows to accommodate an influx of new words, associations, and idioms. Times of rapid technological innovation or political upheaval also quicken the pace of a language's change. For example, European colonialism of the 18th and 19th centuries had a profound linguistic

➤ A medieval monk might spend over a year copying out a Latin text.

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impact on many of the world's languages. On the other hand, historically, there have been places where language has not changed a great deal—backwaters, to use the river metaphor again. The amazing thing about our world and our language today is that "backwaters" are more and more becoming just as connected with the world as the center of the river. Mass media has made it nearly impossible to remain ignorant of our language's metamorphoses. Words that were meaningless five years ago are now ubiquitous. Do you remember the first time you heard the word "Facebook," for example? Or the first time you used the word "Google" as a verb? Probably not. We're immersed in the river of language, flowing along with it. Except for linguists, most of us don't think about how and why a language is changing, because we're part of the world that's changing along with it.

The most recognizable example of a language that stopped changing is Latin. When the Roman Empire fell, Latin gradually died out as fewer and fewer people across Europe needed to speak it. Rome was distant and weak, and oral fluency in Rome's language no longer provided a benefit. Latin was kept around by medieval scholars as the perfect common language—no native speakers to constantly adapt it, no regional dialects to confuse its meaning. Latin was a dry riverbed instead of a rushing river, a very useful and unambiguous channel the educated used to communicate with one another. Yet in some way, this "dead" language is the perfect example of how incredibly vital and dynamic all language is. All the romance languages of Europe are derived from Latin. There are many who argue that in fact, Latin simply *grew* into French, Spanish, Portuguese, and others as it came into contact and was influenced by regional native languages. You don't have to look very far to find Latin's influence even in our Germanic language.

The Rules of Language

So now we have a better understanding of why language can be confusing and ambiguous, but for most of us, language works pretty well on a day-to-day basis. You can order lunch, find out what time your kid's soccer practice is, laugh at the jokes on a sitcom rerun, all through the flawless and seemingly effortless processing and production of language. But how does it work? If language is symbolic and meaning is arbitrary, what keeps the potential chaos in check?

The answer is rules. A language's set of rules is its grammar. Before you curl your lip and skip to the next section, it should be made perfectly clear here that we're not concerned with diagramming sentences or relearning how to identify a dependent clause with an introductory prepositional phrase. Learning the mechanics of how a language's rules work is a fine exercise, but it's not what we'll focus on here. It's enough to know that small children who don't know an adverb from an article follow a language's rules. And despite the fact that grammar has been characterized as a "problem" and "obstacle" for many college writers and speakers, in fact it is a wonderful and useful tool that we all use innately. We're born with a predisposition to grammar, believe it or not.

In the 1980s, much work was done in the field of psycholinguistics that studied how children naturally develop grammatical structure and rules for a language, even when the language as it is taught to them by adults has no grammar or clear rules.[5] Researchers studied communities where linguistically diverse groups of laborers were brought together and had to find ways to communicate. Historically, these communities would develop a **pidgin**, a highly

Pidgin A highly simplified language that develops as a means of communication between two or more groups that do not have a native language in common.

simplified version of the dominant language that the people would learn in order to get across the simplest workaday messages. When the children of these laborers learned that pidgin as a native language, though, they didn't learn the rule-free simplified version their parents spoke. Instead, these children naturally developed a grammar, rules, and complex syntactical structure for their native language, creating what is called a **creole**. Researchers called this innate ability the **language bioprogram hypothesis**.[6]

So for a few paragraphs anyway, put aside any distrust or apathy you may feel toward grammar and instead see it for its incredible usefulness. All languages have an internal structure that limits and places parameters around the way meaning is created by the arbitrary signs of a language. These rules fall into certain categories: phonological, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic.

Phonological Rules

Phonological rules are the guidelines that tell speakers of a language how words are pronounced and what sounds are necessary in order to hear and produce a language. These are the first language rules we "learn" when we acquire language. Infants as young as one month have been shown to recognize and respond to the sounds of their native language.[7]

Yet we don't just learn the phonological rules of our native language, but of our native region. You probably know a Minnesota accent when you hear it. That's because the speakers of a particular area, even those who speak the same language, develop their own phonological rules. A Midwesterner living in the Piedmont region of North Carolina was friends with an alderman of the small town where they both lived. One day, the alderman was showing his Midwestern friend the posters he'd ordered for his upcoming reelection campaign. The friend was a little puzzled, "These are great, Ken, but I don't get it. 'Win with Ken'? How is that a campaign slogan?" Alderman Ken rolled his eyes and drawled, "That's because y'ain't saying it right, you big Yankee. Ever-one else loves it. 'Wee-un with Kee-un' rhymes." The poor transplanted friend wasn't playing by the same phonological rules.

Although the accepted sounds of a language are the first rules we learn (or perhaps *because* they are the first), speakers who come late to a language may find new phonological rules difficult to master. For English speakers, the phonological rules of closely related languages like Spanish, French, or German are fairly simple. We may never produce that perfect Lippe-Detmold "ich" in the back of the throat, or the quintessential Parisian "eu," but at least we can hear and recognize the sounds. Many languages, such as Mandarin, Punjabi, and Navajo, rely on tones—the pitch inflection a speaker uses when voicing a word or syllable—to determine meaning. It would be as if "cat." and "cat?" meant "cat" and "spoon." In fact, many new Mandarin Chinese speakers have an incredibly difficult time distinguishing the word for "mom" (*mā)* with the word for "horse" (*mǎ)*.

Creole A stable language with complex grammar arising from a pidgin which combines words and structures of two or more languages.

Language bioprogram hypothesis A theory suggesting that children have an innate ability to create complex and stable grammar.

Phonological rules Guidelines that tell speakers of a language how words are pronounced and what sounds are necessary in order to hear and produce a language.

➤ An infant whose caregivers speak English is able to make distinctions between voiced consonants that are not recognized by infants whose caregivers speak Mandarin.

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Semantic Rules

And that brings us to the meaning of words. **Semantic rules** tell speakers of a particular language what meaning is generally assigned to a certain word. We know when we order tomato soup for lunch the waiter won't bring us pastrami on rye or an Impressionist painting or a live hamster. Language may be slippery, but semantic rules put limits on how far meaning can be stretched.

After phonological rules, semantic rules are the next piece of language we learn as young children. Just as infants can distinguish phonological differences before they can produce the sounds themselves, a 9-month-old will understand what is meant by the word "milk" or "more" or "mama" before she can say the words. And just as phonological rules change over time and according to region, semantic rules also vary. After all, 15 years ago, a *cougar* was only a large cat native to western North America, not a woman of a certain age on the prowl.

And while to be *pissed* is never a good thing, in the United States it means to be angry and annoyed, but in the United Kingdom it means to be drunk. Each generation appropriates or invents words to distinguish itself semantically from the generation before.

Semantic rules Rules that let speakers of a particular language know what meaning is generally assigned to a certain word.

➤ Changing semantic rules mean that a cougar's natural habitat might be your local bar rather than a national forest.

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Another obstacle to quick comprehension is semantic interference, the problem that arises when the perceived meaning of a word competes with an intended meaning. This interference can be the result of an error, and it is why a single mis-typed letter can be so utterly confusing. One student wrote of a person who inspired him: "I always had enormous respect for my swimming couch." The semantic interference of "couch" creates a moment of bewilderment—a sofa doing laps, perhaps? A split second later, of course, we realize the writer obviously meant "coach." Autocorrect has created an entire new genre of humorous if unintended semantic interference for the readers of texts, posts, and tweets. On the other hand, interference can happen even without the help of typos. If someone told you, "I walked to the bank this afternoon," and you quite logically asked, "Oh, did you need to deposit a check or something?" Semantic interference is the reason you might get a very baffled look in response: "No, I wanted to go fishing, and I don't have a boat."

Syntactic Rules

Syntactic rules tell users of a language how words should be strung together to make meaning. To show how semantic and syntactic rules are quite apart from one another, yet separately very useful, we can create a nearly comprehensible nonsense paragraph:

> *Lately, I've noticed that coppodags have become more and more tolic. I've bought coppodags at the farmer's market for years, but when I get them home, I have to muth and muth them. My husband says I just need to buy my coppodags somewhere else or get used to _____.*

How would you fill in this blank? Obviously, there's no "correct" answer, because for the most part, this paragraph is utterly nonsensical. Yet, if you look at it carefully, you can probably figure out a logical conclusion based on what was said before. Many people who look at this paragraph end it with "muthing." This is important for several reasons. Not only do we recognize that "muth" in the sentence before is a verb that must be performed on coppodags, but we also know to conjugate it to its –ing form (that's a gerund in this case, if anyone wants to keep score). Knowing the syntactic rules of a language allows us to read these sentences like an algebra equation. We can't know what tolic means (because it doesn't mean anything—it will remain an χ in our equation), but we can know with certainty it's an adjective, just as it's clear that coppodag is a noun.

As they acquire language, children tend to learn semantic rules first, then as they acquire knowledge of syntactic rules, they use those rules to "solve" more difficult semantic questions, just as we did in the paragraph above. A toddler will learn the word for "truck" and the word for "move." Very soon

Syntactic rules Rules that tell users of a language how words should be strung together to make meaning.

after that, she will be able to put those words together in a grammatical structure: "Truck move." Gradually, she will say, "Truck moving" and "The truck is moving" and eventually the more grammatically and cognitively sophisticated, "I'm moving my truck." When she hears someone say, "I saw a coppodag moving down the street," the child will be able to figure out through her existing knowledge of grammar that a coppodag is a thing, and it can move—sort of like a truck. Without even knowing what it is, she's already begun to build semantic rules around the unknown word.

As shown in Table 2.1, Slobin's operating principles are a way of thinking about the way children take in linguistic information, starting with A and moving through to G. Very early they learn to pay attention to the ends of words (-ed, -ing, -s). They quickly realize that some sounds (morphemes) are "fixed" and other sounds added to the end shift the meaning of the fixed sounds (principle B). The sixth principle, "Avoid exceptions" is the reason preschoolers may say, "I runned all the way over here!" Once they learn a grammatical rule, they (very logically) apply it generally. They've never heard the word "runned" before, but their operating principles tell them that should be the correct word to use.

TABLE 2.1 Slobin's Operating Principles Used by Young Children[8]

A. Pay attention to the ends of words.

B. The phonological forms of words can by systematically modified.

C. Pay attention to the order of words.

D. Avoid interruption or rearrangement of linguistic units.

E. Underlying semantic relations should be marked overtly and clearly.

F. Avoid exceptions.

G. The use of grammatical markers should make semantic sense.

Source: D.I. Slobin, "Cognitive Prerequisites for the Development of Grammar," in *Studies of Child Language Development* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973), pp. 175–208.

As adults, it's worth learning about children's acquisition of language because these are processes that, in theory, we should get better and better at as we age and become more cognitively advanced. The trouble is, we don't. In the mid-1980s and early 1990s, linguists who were studying second language acquisition in adults developed a theory that included a concept called the Affective Filter.[9] The idea was that an adult's emotional state—including motivation, attitude, and self-confidence—can determine whether that adult receives the input needed to learn a language. When the Affective Filter is up (in other words, when an adult is bored, unmotivated, or anxious) "input is minimized and language acquisition is blocked; when the filter is down, input enters freely and acquisition is facilitated."[10] This filter is unique to adults; children don't have or use it. The clear implication here is that, while children immersed in a language can't help but learn it, adults can actually tune out enough information that they avoid learning it altogether.

Past a certain age, we must decide to acquire language; it no longer happens automatically. And while the Affective Filter was a concept applied mostly to the second language classroom, it's an idea that has relevance to us as communicators in any unfamiliar environment. College students and professionals alike can feel overwhelmed when encountering a new field that uses lots of unfamiliar jargon. A colleague was trying to implement a new software program to track visits in her writing center. There was a glitch, and she was invited to the conference call meeting where IT professionals from her college and the software company would discuss how to fix the problem. "I was sitting at the table taking notes as the server people, security specialists, and network administrators were talking. Suddenly, I realized that for the past five minutes, I'd been writing down the words and phrases I heard, but I didn't understand any of them. I had a page full of what were to me nonsense words. After that, I sort of checked out and simply thanked everyone graciously at the end of the call." Regardless of whether she did it consciously, the colleague put up her filter and stopped receiving linguistic input. She's not going to learn the language of information technology unless she decides she needs to and makes a conscious effort to do the hard work of paying attention and exercising the language acquisition skills she may not have used much since childhood. For all of us who are working to improve our language facility (including vocabulary and grammar), it's important to realize that as adults, our filters are powerful. Language acquisition no longer happens unconsciously, so attitude, motivation, and simple attention are necessary to success.

> **What's it to you?**
> Recall a time you've been in a situation where you felt linguistically out of place. Perhaps you were the only one who couldn't speak the common language. Maybe you were invited to a meeting where lots of institutional acronyms or specialized terminology were used. It could even be a party where people made references to events or people you didn't know or used unfamiliar slang. How did you react? Did you mentally check out or did you remain engaged? What circumstances impacted that response?

Pragmatic Rules

The final rules of language we learn as children (and if we're smart, we continue learning throughout our lives) are the **pragmatic rules**. These are the rhetorical rules of language, the aspects that have to do with context—who's speaking, who's listening, and in what situation the exchange is taking place. Pragmatic rules are generally unstated. No grammar handbook or thesaurus is going to tell you to avoid asking the checkout lady at the grocery store why

> **Pragmatic rules** rules of language appropriateness based on context—who's speaking, who's listening, and in what situation the exchange is taking place.

➤ Kids say what's on their minds . . . many times in spite of the pragmatic rules of language.

she dyed her mustache purple. Your 3-year-old, however, has the semantic and syntactic capabilities to do just that, and it's because pragmatic rules are the last and most complicated to learn that he might ask that question, much to your embarrassment and horror.

Pragmatic rules aren't just tough for children, though. Adults blunder through and break pragmatic rules all the time. Like any cooperative game, a conversational exchange works best when both parties are operating under the same set of rules, and because pragmatic rules are unstated and so dependent upon each individual's frame of reference, they are also the cause of most of our everyday misunderstandings. Let's say that in your family, it's perfectly okay to debate politics and make good-natured verbal jabs at your brother's favorite candidates and political talk shows. What would happen, though, if you uncritically tried to apply that rule more broadly? You wouldn't dream of openly mocking a boss's or a business client's political views to his or her face. Pragmatic rules are what keep us from making that mistake.

And yet, all of us have to deal with people who plow through pragmatic rules without even noticing they've offended or caused a misunderstanding. Think back to a conversation with someone whose comments or questions "crossed the line." Or recall a time you thought to yourself, "Ack! I really did not need to know that about you." Obviously, you know exactly where "the line" is for you, but equally obviously, your conversational partner did not. One of the best things we can do as competent communicators is to:

1. Realize that our pragmatic rules are not necessarily *everyone's* pragmatic rules, and

2. Attune our awareness to others' reactions so that we can know when we've accidentally violated a conversational partner's pragmatic rules.

Finally, part of being a competent communicator is about how to listen and intuit others' pragmatic rules. In fact, the subfield of linguistics called **pragmatics** puts more emphasis on a communicator's ability to listen effectively than her ability to speak. **Pragmatic competence** is defined, not as following all possible pragmatic rules, but as the ability to understand another speaker's intended meaning (perhaps even in spite of what the person actually says). The practical implication is that we should generally avoid taking personally the insensitive language of others. Most people break pragmatic rules out of ignorance rather than malice. Later, we'll discuss in more detail those people who purposely use language to demean others. But either way, it doesn't do any good to internalize what amounts to the rhetorical bungling of others. Looking at pragmatic rules from a less emotional perspective will allow you to know when to take action (as in the case of sexual harassment, for example) and when to brush off the linguistic incompetence of others.

Pragmatics Subfield of linguistics that puts more emphasis on a communicator's ability to listen effectively than her ability to speak.

Pragmatic competence Not following all possible pragmatic rules, but the ability to understand another speaker's intended meaning.

The Power of Language

What's in a Name?

Any kid knows that, despite the fact that sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never harm me, the names we give our ideas, products, causes, children, and many other things have an enormous impact on how those things are perceived by others. Marketers and politicians are among the most canny "name changers" out there.

Would you want to eat a toothfish? Doesn't exactly sound appetizing, does it? A few years ago, though, the Fish Formerly Known as Toothfish was renamed the Chilean Sea Bass, and suddenly the erstwhile scorned toothfish has become a hit in markets, restaurants, and reality shows on the Food Network. Similarly, when Republicans in the 1990s wanted to repeal the tax imposed on the property or wealth that a deceased person passed on to survivors, they used the term "death tax" to describe the government's cut of the goods rather than the more innocuous-sounding "estate tax."

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There are many more serious examples as well. People on either side of the abortion debate recognize the incredible power of names. Do we say "baby" or "fetus"? It makes a difference to how a debate is framed. What do we call ourselves, for that matter? No one wants to be called "anti-choice" or "pro-death," so both sides claim names that put them on the side of right—pro-life (wonderful—who isn't?) and pro-choice (of course—we all deserve choice!).

It can be a bit uncomfortable for us to consider how powerful names can be. We don't like to hear that we may unconsciously vote for the candidate with the multisyllabic name simply because single syllable names (Bush, Gore, Clay) are much more likely to have extant associations. Or that youth with statistically "unpopular" names are more likely to end up in juvenile detention facilities.[11] The important thing to remember is that names can have a powerful and illogical influence, but only as long as we make judgments based on those names unconsciously. Studies show that once a person becomes aware of an illogical influence, he or she is more able to set aside the influence and make a more rational decision.

So go ahead. Ask out that cute girl named Mabel. She may be more fun than you think.

"It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought—that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ing-soc [English Socialism]—should be literally unthinkable, at least as far as thought is dependent on words. . . . A person growing up with Newspeak *as his sole language would no more know that 'equal' had once had the secondary meaning of 'politically equal,' or that 'free' had once meant 'intellectually free,' than, for instance, a person who had never heard of chess would be aware of the secondary meanings attaching to 'queen' or 'rook.' There would be many crimes and errors which it would be beyond his power to commit, simply because they were nameless and therefore unimaginable."*

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Linguistic relativity The idea that language shapes our view of the world and even how we can think about it.

Sapir–Whorf hypothesis The most recognizable expression of the theory of linguistic relativity.

Linguistic Relativity

In George Orwell's novel *1984*, the all-seeing governmental Big Brother has invented Newspeak, a simplified, malevolently user-friendly language for the populace. But in simplifying language to the point of emptiness, Big Brother has taken away the ability of the citizenry to think clearly about abstract concepts like free will, equality, or even history. The implication is that having a word for a thing allows us to examine, consider, and have opinions about that thing, and by extension, a person devoid of the means to express an idea is devoid of that idea. While Orwell's Newspeak is perhaps the most vivid depiction of the consequences implied by thought's reliance on language, the author certainly didn't invent the theory. The idea that language shapes our view of the world and even how we can think about it is called **linguistic relativity**.

The most familiar expression of linguistic relativity is the **Sapir–Whorf hypothesis**, which emerged in the 1930s when Benjamin Lee Whorf published his observations and analyses of Native American languages and cultures.[12] Whorf's model was built on the theories of 19th century linguists like Wilhelm von Humboldt, who wrote in 1820, "Man lives in the world about him principally, indeed, exclusively, as language presents it to him."[13] Whorf was even more heavily influenced by his teacher Edward Sapir, who said, "No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached." Although Whorf himself never named the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis (one of his students did that, perhaps in a bid for a stellar letter of recommendation), he gained attention with articles like "Language, Thought, and Reality," in which he argued for the link between language and worldview. One of Whorf's most interesting examples supporting linguistic relativity was from the Hopi language, which, according to Whorf assumed a cyclical, "round" conception of time that was reflected in its lack of verb tenses (Whorf characterized English as a "temporal language" and Hopi as a "timeless language"). In addition, according to Whorf, a native Hopi speaker didn't quantify increments of time the way a native English speaker would. There is no word for "days" or "hours" for example. A Hopi might say "I left on the fifth day" instead of "I stayed five days." A

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speaker of English (or any Indo-European language) might ask, "How can you possibly express objective reality without being able to differentiate between doing something right now and having done it a week ago?" Whorf answered that for the Hopi, the disconnect doesn't occur because reality is never truly objective. The Hopi don't need verb tense because their world view doesn't call for it.

While Whorf and his hypothesis have come under serious attack since the 1930s, sociolinguists today still study the idea of linguistic relativity. They certainly dispute some of Whorf's broader generalizations, especially those that intimate that language must necessarily limit thought. It's important to note that there are linguists who argue strongly against the relativists. These **linguistic universalists** believe that conscious thought happens apart from linguistic rules, and that in fact intrapersonal communication is mostly carried out in a nonlinguistic "mentalese".[14] According to this view, Orwell's Newspeak is a bogeyman; impoverished language does not necessarily lead to impoverished thought.

Linguistic universalists
Those who believe that conscious thought happens apart from linguistic rules.

bogeyman = an imaginary evil

> ## Jot It Down
> Do you think you are a linguistic relativist or a universalist? What makes you say so?

Powerless and Powerful Speech

There is a continuing debate on the nature of powerless language. Researchers who first studied the impacts of "powerless language" called it "women's language",[15] and although this may at first seem horribly sexist to equate powerlessness with women, study after study has shown that (1) powerless language does negatively impact a listener's impression of the speaker's competence,[16] and (2) women are much more likely than men to use powerless language.[17]

More recently, there has been push-back against characterizing certain types of indirect language as "powerless," let alone labeling this language as purely a woman's linguistic problem. These writers and researchers argue that both men and women may choose to hedge or qualify their remarks, but historically, these linguistic habits are only been labeled as "powerless" when women use them.

Still, American communication culture values directness and confidence, and the web is full of blog posts and advice listicles telling readers how they can eliminate powerless language from their professional communication. Gmail users can even download a plugin called "Just Not Sorry" that will underline qualifiers and hedges so the user may edit them out if she (or he) chooses.[18] Instead of wading into the debate of who uses powerless language and why, this text will focus on the impacts of powerless language and suggest ways for all communicators—both men and women—to use it with less frequency and greater awareness. Table 2.2 presents six linguistic habits that can cause listeners to perceive the speaker as powerless.

TABLE 2.2   Six linguistic habits of powerless language.

1. Overpoliteness	Excuse me, please. I'm so sorry to disturb you, sir. I apologize.
2. Hedges	It sounds like it could be a possibility.
3. Hesitations	I . . . ah . . . let's see . . . I think that many people wouldn't, uhm, you know, agree with him.
4. Tag Questions	That was a productive meeting, don't you think?
5. Intensifiers	I am so happy about getting this client. He's going to be a really wonderful addition to our team.
6. Disclaimers/Qualifiers	If all the conditions turn out to be correct, I think we should do this, but I'm not as knowledgeable as others on the team.

Overpoliteness The linguistic habit of apologizing too much, adding too many honorifics, or otherwise being too "polite" to communicate directly or clearly.

Hedges and tag questions Verbal signals that you are waiting for another's approval before you make a clear decision.

Disclaimers or qualifiers "Outs" that allow a speaker to backpedal if the assertion proves incorrect or ends up overruled.

Intensifiers Words that are meant to strengthen the impact of a word or statement but instead may weaken it.

Hesitations Meaningless vocalizations such as "Uhm . . . ," "Er . . . ," Aaah . . . " and others that fill pauses in speech.

While rudeness is never a good option for savvy communicators, **overpoliteness** can cause you to be perceived as meek, or even worse, insincere. Some people in an effort to maintain social harmony and to allow others to save face will apologize out of habit. If you know you have this tendency, just be aware that constantly apologizing for things that aren't your fault can weaken your position in communication situations.

Hedges and **tag questions** are both verbal signals that you are waiting for another's approval before you make a clear decision. Again, for many people, these phrases are simply habits rather than a true reflection of insecurity, but they can harm a speaker's credibility if used too often.

In uncomfortable situations, many communicators will try to blunt the impact of an assertion by including **disclaimers** or **qualifiers**. These are "outs" that allow a speaker to backpedal if the assertion proves incorrect or ends up overruled. Like all "weak language," disclaimers and qualifiers are not bad of themselves. Disclaimers can keep a speaker from looking like a pompous ass, and qualifiers are sometimes necessary to clarify a point or highlight nuances. It's when we become reliant on them that others begin to question our confidence in our own ideas.

Consider which statement has more power: "I am so annoyed," or "I am annoyed." According to researchers, the use of **intensifiers** like "so," "very," and "really," tends to lessen the impact of a speaker's statements rather than strengthen them.[19] While it may be disputed that intensifiers are in fact a "weak" linguistic construction, it is certain that women use them more often. Researchers often turn to pop culture to examine trends in language, and to track the average use of intensifiers, a study of the television show *Friends* from 1994 to 2002 showed that, like in the real world, the female characters used intensifiers three times as often as the male characters.[20]

The worst kind of powerless language, however, is speech that is full of **hesitations** or unnecessary fillers. Hedges, tag questions, disclaimers and qualifiers, overpoliteness, and intensifiers can all be mitigated by a speaker's confident attitude. Most listeners will learn to ignore much "powerless" language if they feel the underlying message is clear and well-informed.[21] Voiced hesitations, though, are always harmful to a speaker's credibility. Listeners who hear an idea articulated with hesitations will not only rate the speaker as less powerful, but the idea as less creditable. It's important to distinguish that hesitations are not the same as pauses. Effective, powerful speakers often pause to

collect their thoughts, emphasize an idea, or give their listeners time to think. A hesitant speaker will instead fill the void with meaningless words and noise.

Verbal Tics

In early 2009, Caroline Kennedy briefly campaigned to replace Hillary Clinton's vacated Senate seat. However, after a few media appearances that could only be called unfortunate, she dropped out of the running. Commentators placed a good part of the blame on a verbal tic. In one interview with *The New York Times*, Kennedy uttered the phrase "you know" 130 times. While most of us will never lose a Senate seat because of a verbal tic, it's a cautionary tale worth attending to. Whether yours is "you know," "like," "okay," or something more exotic like "whatnot," verbal tics can draw attention away from your message and damage your credibility. It's hard to logically consider the value of a speaker's point when all you can think is, "If this moron says 'anyways' one more time, I'm going to scream."

The most unfortunate thing about our verbal tics is that we are usually unaware of them: No one *means* to say "like" after every other word. And just like any addiction, the first step to quitting is recognizing the problem and finding a partner to support you. Enlist a friend or family member to help you, then record yourself having a casual conversation. Listen to the recording and pay attention to the number and types of your verbal tics. This will help you know what pet words or phrases are interrupting your communication. In subsequent conversations, use your intrapersonal communication to "flag" those tics that give you particular trouble. Every time you say "like" or "you know" or whatever your tic happens to be, allow a silent buzzer to go off in your brain. Even more importantly, ask your friend or family member to alert you when you've used a verbal tic. To give you practice speaking without the aid of filler words, read aloud from books, newspapers, or magazines. If you have small children, this step should be pretty easy, since you're probably reading to them anyway, but even without an audience this exercise is helpful.

Language and Credibility

It is too simplistic to say that powerful language is simply speech that demonstrates the opposite characteristics of powerless speech. On the other hand, if you as a speaker can judiciously monitor your tag questions, qualifiers, and intensifiers, while avoiding altogether hesitations and verbal tics, you will necessarily be more assertive and clear in your communication.[22] And even better, by cultivating these speech habits, you will be perceived by others as more competent, not just as a communicator but in general.

This text, though, is not only concerned with helping you improve your own communication habits, but also in helping you become a more knowledgeable observer of others. (That's what rhetorical awareness is all about, after all.) One of the things you may have noticed as we've discussed the power of language is that the words themselves aren't powerful; it's their impact on others that lends them power. As a competent communicator, you should be aware that we all are susceptible to the power of language, and that it's an important skill to be able to distinguish when eloquence is empty of substance.

What's it to you?
Twentieth-century philosopher Bertrand Russell said, "To acquire immunity to eloquence is of the utmost importance to the citizens of a democracy." What do you think he meant by this? Is Russell's statement an exaggeration? What would the political consequences be of a citizenry "immune to eloquence"?

The Dr. Fox Lecture

Over 30 years ago, a group of researchers set out to determine how much eloquence it took to fool smart people into thinking they'd learned something when in fact they had not. Their original point was to protest against the use of student satisfaction surveys to evaluate college professors' teaching. They argued that an eloquent, charismatic teacher could persuade students they were learning valuable information when in fact the students were learning no more from these "excellent" teachers than from their more boring colleagues. These researchers coached an actor to give a speech at an academic conference in which he would "teach charismatically and nonsubstantively on a topic about which he knew nothing."[23] Using the jargon of his audience's field and making (pointless) references to the latest research, the supposed Dr. Fox spoke for an hour about "the application of mathematics to human behavior." Although his entire presentation was carefully crafted to be utterly free of useful or applicable information, an audience of psychologists, psychiatrists, and professional educators never suspected they were listening to a fraud, and in fact gave him favorable ratings when asked to assess the presentation. Obviously, using the "right" language is a powerful tool in establishing and building credibility.

On the other hand, it's clear from this example that there can be a dark side to the persuasive power of language. Former stockbroker and financial advisor Bernie Madoff spent most of the 1990s and 2000s doing exactly what "Dr. Fox" did, only Madoff's end result wasn't a scholarly paper but a Ponzi scheme that cost his investors $20 billion. By purposely misusing the complicated and contradictory language of Wall Street investing, Madoff deceived not only individual investors but also agents of the Securities and Exchange Commission into believing his investments were legitimate. The lesson of Dr. Fox and Bernie Madoff is that we should be careful and critical listeners as well as speakers, and while language is a powerful tool, there are those who misuse it. (Lucky for you, the very next chapter covers listening.)

With that caution in mind, ethical communicators can—and should—take advantage of the benefits of being well-spoken. Perhaps even more important is to consider the impact of *not* fully developing language skills. It's easy to imagine a person with a wonderful idea—something new and substantive—who is, however, unable to get support for the idea because of the clumsy, inarticulate way the idea is explained. The important thing to know here is that the way a person uses language can either lend her enormous credibility or completely destroy that credibility. Language competence is something worth developing and strengthening.

Culture and Language

As you read in the section on linguistic relativity, many scholars believe that language has at least some impact on how the speakers of that language mentally process their world. What all linguists, relativists and universalists alike agree on is that culture impacts how language is used by its speakers. If you've ever read a humorous translation like the one on a Bangkok dry cleaner's, "Drop your trousers here for best results" or the message printed on the bottom of a Japanese eraser, "We are ecologically minded. This package will

self-destruct in Mother Earth," it's clear that word for word translations are never exactly right—sometimes they're not even close. Each language has its own style, and speakers of various languages show linguistic competence in different ways. Depending on the culture and language, communicators will value different linguistic characteristics. A competent communicator may speak formally or informally, with vivid and extensive detail or succinctly, with frank candor or polite indirectness. Translation isn't the only obstacle to cross-cultural communication. Even when two people are speaking the same language, if one of them is applying the verbal style of a different language, miscommunication is still likely to occur. In other words, you can learn Mandarin Chinese, but as long as you retain an American sensibility as you speak it, your communication style will remain "foreign" to other Mandarin speakers.

A common way to categorize verbal styles is by directness—whether and to what extent a speaker is expected to be straightforward in communication situations.[24] Cultures that prefer direct language are called **low-context cultures**, since knowing the context of an exchange is many times unnecessary for understanding the communicators' rhetorical intentions. In everyday situations, people are expected to "speak their minds," and as listeners, we assume that what we're being told is a reflection of the speaker's true feelings. In **high-context cultures**, though, this isn't the case. High-context cultures value language's ability to build and maintain relationships, and social harmony is valued above candor. Ambiguity is tolerated and even encouraged, and the listener is expected to fill in the blanks. Silence is not interpreted as rejection so much as thoughtful consideration.

The United States falls on the low-context end of the spectrum. We tend to value "straight talk" and may become frustrated when others won't get to the point. Many Asian and African cultures, on the other hand, would find this kind of bluntness rude and heavy-handed. Differences in verbal style are apparent in the business world as well. In a low-context culture, you may start a meeting with "Welcome everyone. Thanks for coming. Now let's get down to business . . . " This would be unheard of in a high-context culture, where a relationship must be established and built up before any business could be conducted.

If you thought understanding rhetorical situations was tough for Americans, just consider how complicated it is for a communicator from a high-context culture. At least we can count on the fact that, except in situations of deceit or sarcasm, the *logos* or content of a verbal message is an accurate reflection of what is meant. A person from a high-context culture, though, must rely much more heavily on a careful analysis of *ethos* and *pathos*. On the other hand, it could be argued that those of us from low-context cultures don't spend enough time and energy paying attention to the rhetorical situation. Maybe if we started thinking like high-context communicators, we'd become more competent even in our low-context culture. (See **Table 2.3**.)

Low-context cultures
Cultures that prefer direct language.

High-context cultures
Cultures that value language's ability to build and maintain relationships, and social harmony is valued above candor.

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TABLE 2.3 Comparison of Conversation in High- and Low-Context Cultures

Conversational Competencies	High-context	Low-context
Opening or closing conversations	Introduction and rapport-building take more time. A polite conversationalist waits to raise the "business at hand." Closing conversations also takes time. If a conversational partner seems inclined to talk, a competent communicator must be very careful not to make the speaker feel he is being cut off, even when the listener needs to leave.	The conversational partners are usually more willing to make do with perfunctory introductions. (Perhaps because of this, members of low-context cultures are much more likely to forget the names of new acquaintances.) Closings may be abrupt. Most conversational partners wouldn't take offense if the other says, "I'd like to talk longer, but I have to run . . . "
Taking turns during conversations and interrupting	Turns are more strictly observed. Interrupting is seen as childish and pushy. (Only a child would not have the self-control to wait until the other was finished.)	People from low-context cultures are more willing to jump their turns and interrupt. Interrupting is often a way to assert control in a conversation.
Using silence as a communicative device	Silence is often used to communicate points in conversation, and because turn-taking is more strictly observed, a high-context conversational partner won't necessarily jump in to fill the silence.	Silence is not a common feature of conversation in low-context cultures. In fact, we generally think of silences as "awkward." If a speaker tries to use silence as a communicative device, the silence will likely be "filled" by the conversational partner.

Some other ways that culture impacts styles of communication include:

❏ Knowing appropriate topics of conversation
❏ Interjecting humor at appropriate times
❏ Knowing the appropriate amount of speech to be used by conversational partners

While these competencies can't be generalized into a high-context/low-context table, it should be fairly clear how these might play themselves out in conversations. Many cultures value formality in language. A number of African languages, for example, use honorifics like Mma and Ra for everyday exchanges, even among good friends. More formal cultures also have stricter pragmatic rules when it comes to humor and personal questions. Cultures that value detail and elaboration in their use of language allow much longer turns in conversations. People from cultures that value succinctness (like ours) may get impatient with the long conversational turns common in other cultures.

Summary

Language is a complex system of arbitrary symbols that only functions as a means of communication when the meaning of those symbols is agreed upon by a group of people. The arbitrary nature of language means that meaning is never truly fixed, but resides in the people who use the language. Because of this, and in order to more closely express the complex, contradictory nature of human existence, language must also be slippery and flexible. Language changes dramatically over time, and a single language varies from region to region and generation to generation. Rules keep the potential chaos in check, though. Phonological rules, semantic rules, syntactic rules, and pragmatic rules give parameters to a language, keeping language from simply being random and personal (and hence, not very good for purposes of communication). People who share a language share more than words and rules, though. Language has the power to influence worldview, or at least shift the lens through which the speakers of a language see and understand the world. Language is also powerful in its ability to create unconscious associations and establish authority. People are deemed credible or not, depending on how they use language to express their ideas. Finally, culture profoundly impacts the preferred way language is used. People from low-context cultures use language as a means primarily to directly express ideas and emotions. High-context cultures value the ability of communication to build and maintain relationships, so language is used more indirectly. Speakers rely on the communication competence of the participants to fill in gaps and infer meaning.

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Name: _____   Date: _____

Questions and Exercises

1. Break the hesitation habit. Think of a concept you've recently learned about in one of your other classes or on the job. Partner up with a classmate, then take turns speaking for three minutes, explaining the concept to your partner. As the speaker, do your best to avoid voiced hesitations and verbal tics, because the listener's job will be to "buzz" your every "uhm . . . " "you know," "like," and so on. Your buzz can be visual (a hand up) or vocal (an annoying "erhn"). This exercise should be fun rather than stressful, so don't take it too seriously.

2. Practice your powerful but rhetorically savvy speech. For each of these situations, craft a message that avoids powerless language, but maintains honesty and courtesy.

    a. Explain to a customer why you cannot refund his purchase for cash.

    b. Approach your mother-in-law about the gifts she's constantly giving your child, despite your having hinted that your tiny apartment doesn't have room for one more giant plastic toy.

    c. Ask your boss for two days off to attend a college homecoming weekend.

3. Analyze the language of your personal and professional communication. Examine an email you recently sent to a professor. Now look at a message you recently sent to a friend, either through e-mail, social media, or text. Consider punctuation, usage, capitalization, and word choice. Is the language you use in each message different depending on the audience? On the medium? How do you decide whether to spend extra time to make sure a message is "correct" before you hit send?

4. Imagine a scenario where a person from a low-context culture and a high-context culture might have difficulties communicating productively. What kinds of trouble might they encounter as they hold a conversation, and what can they do to improve their communication?

5. Practice your critical listening (as a preview to Chapter 3). Choose three "Dr. Fox" types from your class and give them time to prepare. Your instructor will provide an obscure concept or term that is unfamiliar to the class. One of the Dr. Foxes will provide the correct definition, while the other two will deliver convincing lies to the class. Decide who is telling the truth and who is using language to establish false credibility.